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ABSTRACT

Karaoke (singing along to music videos) has swept Taiwan with such force that many people go to singing schools to improve their singing. Three cases in this paper demonstrate how the ethos, or credibility, of the singer is a combination of initial and derived ethos. Who the singer is tends to determine how much attention he or she receives initially. During the performance the ethos can be derived from the difficulty implied in the adopted method of singing (singing without recorded accompaniment, singing with recorded accompaniment only, and singing with recorded accompaniment and vocal), the difficulty of the chosen song, and/or his or her linguistic versatility (whether a singer can sing in different dialects and languages). In a society where the after-dinner speech is often substituted for by after-dinner karaoke, the ethos of the "singer" can be an issue as important as, if not more important than, the ethos of the public speaker when communication processes within it are analyzed. (Eleven references are attached.) (Author/SG)

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Ethos Derived from Karaoke Performance in Taiwan

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Abstract:

Ethos Derived from Karaoke Performance in Taiwan

Karaoke has swept Taiwan with such force that many go to singing schools improving their singing skills. The three cases presented in this paper demonstrate how the ethos, or credibility, of the singer, is a combination of initial and derived ethos. Who the singer is tends to determine how much attention he or she receives initially. During the performance the ethos can be derived from the difficulty implied in the adopted method of singing (singing without recorded accompaniment, singing with recorded accompaniment only, and singing with recorded accompaniment and vocal), the difficulty of the chosen song, and/or his or her linguistic versatility (whether a singer can sing in different dialects and languages).

Ethos Derived from Karaoke Performance in Taiwan

LaSalle (1993) stated in San Francisco Chronicle that "For some people karaoke isn't fad but a way of life" (p. E1). The statement is especially true to many East Asians. In a recent issue of National Geographic, the force of karaoke in Taiwan is quantified as follows:

> Karaoke, the Japanese fad of singing along to music videos, has swept Taiwan with such force that singing schools demand tuitions as high as $75 an hour. (Zich, 1993, p. 19)

Nonprofessional singers in Taiwan are eager to improve their singing skills for better karaoke performance because karaoke has become "a way of life." While they may want to improve their singing in order to enjoy karaoke more, their participation in karaoke usually implies more than just entertainment. Their karaoke performance can have a bearing on their ethos as well. Ethos, the Greek term for source credibility, according to McCroskey (1986), is "the attitude toward a source of communication held at a given time by a receiver" (p. 62). McCroskey (1986) also writes that "a source's ethos may vary greatly from time to time, even with the same receiver." In addition, Condon and Yousef (1975) note that what constitutes the ethos of the speaker can vary with culture:

> As a general principle the ethos of the speaker may universally be the most important factor in

persuasiveness. However, what constitutes good ethos is not necessarily universal. (p. 246)

In Taiwan, although singing well is unlikely to be associated directly with occupational competence, it often enhances one's overall popularity. For example, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Frederick Chien "earned a lot of clapping" for his singing at a party for journalists ("Tan Ni," 1993). The Minister of the Interior, Po-hsiung Wu, who is perceived to sing better than any other high-ranking government official, "has faced a challenge from the Minister of Foreign Affairs" ("Tan Ni," 1993). In spite of the light tone of the news, Chien's karaoke performance has attracted media attention and projected a positive image for himself.

Karaoke has permeated throughout every corner of Taiwan. Sing-along machines can be found in many households, offices, barracks as well as restaurants and bars. As after-dinner speeches are common in the United States, a formal meal is routinely followed by a karaoke session in Taiwan.

There are two forms of karaoke in commercial settings in Taiwan: performance-oriented singing in a restaurant or bar, and relationship-oriented singing in an isolated, sound-proof room. The former is public singing in front of an audience, while the latter occurs between two or more friends behind a closed door. In non-commercial settings, the boundary between performance and non-performance is usually less clear. Because ethos is largely irrelevant to the relationship-

oriented karaoke, this study focused on the performance-oriented form of karaoke. On the basis of the analysis of three karaoke cases in Taiwan answers to the following questions were sought: What constitutes ethos in karaoke performance in Taiwan?

The first case presented below was based on a live coverage by a Taiwanese TV station, while the remaining two were based on the author's direct involvement and observation. For all the three cases, other viewers had been consulted before the following processes were reported.

Mr. and Mrs. Wu

Po-hsiung Wu is the Minister of the Interior in Taiwan. According to a recent poll, he enjoyed a 70% popularity and was known to 90% of the residents in Taiwan ("Lien Nei Ko," 1993). He is also the only cabinet minister who has a reputation for singing well in karaoke. This explains why, as previously mentioned, Chien's singing was perceived to be a "challenge" to him.

In the summer of 1993 karaoke constituted the major part of a large benefit gala. Both Wu and his wife were invited to attend the gala as VIPs but not scheduled to sing. However, a businessman said he would make a significant donation should Mr. Wu sing, so a high expectation toward Wu's participation in singing was immediately developed among the audience. Everyone seemed to feel that Wu would sing well and it would be a luxury to listen to a minister sing. Without any

reluctance, Wu accepted the invitation and went to the stage with his wife. The couple chose to sing a Southern Fukienese song. As a Chinese dialect, Southern Fukienese is referred to by many Taiwanese people simply as "Taiwanese" and translated by some linguists as "Southern Min" (e.g., Tang, 1993, p. 243). It is used more frequently than the official dialect, Mandarin, by many in Taiwan. By singing in Southern Fukienese dialect, Wu was able to send a commonality sharing or goodwill message to those who spoke the dialect regularly. In addition, the song they chose to sing, "Hold Your Hand," was perceived to be a difficult one to sing. Compounding their high status with the dialect and song chosen for singing, Wu and his wife not only attracted everyone's attention but also won loud applause at the end of their singing.

Mr. Liu

In the summer of 1989, a banquet was arranged in the hub of Taipei City for employees in the International Traffic Section of China Airlines' Taipei District. The International Traffic Section, stationed in Taipei C.K.S. International Airport, had over 100 traffic agents besides supervisors, assistant traffic managers, and a traffic manager. A small number of employees of the section could not make it to join the banquet because they were on duty that night in the airport. Among those who attended the banquet, the Manager of the Taipei District, Mr. Liu, had the highest rank within China Airlines. The whole International Traffic Section was

under his supervision. However, since Liu's district office was located in Taipei City most traffic agents who worked in the airport did not see him often.

The party was held in a large banquet room of a restaurant. While dishes were being served some employees proposed to have a karaoke session after the meal, so later a set of karaoke equipment was transported to the banquet room. The karaoke session started right after the meal. Several people sang cheerfully while others were listening. Then an assistant manager of the International Traffic Section invited Liu to sing. Liu accepted the invitation and stepped toward the spot for the singer without hesitation. Audience clapped loudly to welcome his performance. Liu chose to sing a song not found in the karaoke tapes provided, so he had to sing without recorded accompaniment. The audience was quite amazed to learn that he was going to sing this way. Many were whispering to each other about his choice because singing without recorded accompaniment was perceived to be even more difficult than singing with recorded accompaniment only (without recorded vocal). Nevertheless Liu did a good job in his singing and it was quite a surprise to the audience, who never thought about the singing capability of their district manager.

Dr. Chang

In the summer of 1993, an international communication conference was held in Taipei. The conference lasted for

three days--Sunday afternoon, Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday morning. A farewell party including a banquet and an after-dinner karaoke was arranged for all conference registrants on Tuesday night.

Dr. Chang, as a major organizer of the conference, had been a communication professor for many years at the Taiwanese university sponsoring the conference. Most professors and graduate students attending the conference knew him well.

The karaoke session started with some pre-arranged warm-up programs, in which some graduate students were singing and telling jokes. Chang was requested to sing by some graduate students after the audience was well aroused. The students were quite pleased when he agreed to sing. Chang was obviously prepared for the karaoke since he knew exactly what songs he was going to sing. His singing skill was at the average level. However, it was the range of the songs he chose to sing that impressed many people. Within a short period of time, he had sung songs in Mandarin, Southern Fukienese, and English. The applause he received from the audience demanded encores and attracted attention from all who were attending the party. Many were surprised to see that Chang, as a well-known scholar who had successfully arranged this meaningful international conference, can <u>also</u> sing.

Initial and Derived Ethos

Although McCroskey (1986) defines ethos as an attitude, he emphasizes that the two are not identical. According to

him, "ethos" is multidimensional, while the term "attitude" usually refers to a single dimension--the "evaluative dimension" (pp. 63-64). For example, Aristotle identified the dimensions of ethos for the public speaker as intelligence, character, and good will (p. 64). From the three previously presented cases, the ethos of the karaoke singer in Taiwan is also associated with a variety of factors. The three singers could attract their audience's attention before they started singing primarily because of their status and reputation. However, the status alone would not have enhanced their existing ethos if some other elements had been missing during their performance. Good ethos, in other words, is accumulated through two broad stages: before and during karaoke performance. The concepts of three types of ethos introduced in the current literature on rhetoric communication can be applied to explain the situation. The three are "initial credibility" (or "extrinsic credibility"), "derived credibility" (or "intrinsic credibility") and "terminal credibility" (e.g., DeVito, 1994, pp. 366; Lucas, 1992, pp. 326-327; McCroskey, 1986, pp. 62-63). According to McCroskey (1986), "initial ethos" refers to "the ethos of a source prior to the beginning of a given communicative act," whereas "derived ethos" is "the ethos of a source produced during the act of communicating" (pp. 62-63). The ethos that the source enjoys at the completion of a communicative act is called

"terminal credibility" (p. 63). As Lucas (1992) stated, the three can be combined in different ways:

> High initial credibility is a great advantage for any speaker, but it can be destroyed during a speech, resulting in low terminal credibility. The reverse can also occur. A speaker with low initial credibility may enhance his or her credibility during the speech and end up with high terminal credibility . . . (p. 327)

Generally speaking, derived ethos is more rhetorically decisive than initial ethos. As McCroskey (1986) indicates, the main effect high initial ethos has in informative communication is "to increase the attention of members of the audience" (p. 70). The most desirable situation to the public speaker is, however, an amalgamation of high initial ethos and high derived ethos. This rule seems to apply to the karaoke singer as well. The ideal situation that combines the two is represented in each of the three cases presented in this study.

The initial ethos of the karaoke singer in Taiwan, as reflected in the three cases, comes from the singer's status and reputation. The way in which the derived ethos is established during karaoke performance, however, is more complex than the initial ethos. A variety of factors can influence how the singer is perceived during his or her performance. Based on the observation of the three cases,

determining factors for good ethos of karaoke performance in Taiwan include at least the following:

First, the adopted method of singing is perceived by the audience as an important indicator of singing capability. The three methods in order of perceived difficulty are (a) singing without recorded accompaniment, (b) singing with recorded accompaniment only, and (c) singing with recorded accompaniment and vocal. While "singing with recorded accompaniment only" may evidence a higher level of familiarity with the song than does "singing with recorded accompaniment and vocal," "singing without recorded accompaniment" can demonstrate a more thorough mastery over singing. The most commonly adopted method is "singing with recorded accompaniment only." "Singing with recorded accompaniment and vocal" seem to represent a "below average" singing capability. "Singing without recorded accompaniment," though not frequently adopted, does show off a singer's superior capability. For example, by choosing this method the district manager of China Airlines impressed the audience before he even started singing.

Secondly, the song chosen for singing also represents the level of challenge that the singer is willing to accept. Some songs are perceived to be more difficult to sing than others. Singing a slow, sentimental song is generally regarded to be more difficult than singing a fast, rock one. Audience tends to make comments such as "Oh, this is a difficult one!" as

soon as a difficult song is identified. Therefore, a good way to enhance ethos seems to be to choose "difficult" and yet familiar songs to sing. All those who were solicited comments after they watched Wu's singing agreed that the song he chose to sing, "Hold Your Hand," is a "difficult" one. Singing a difficult song obviously demonstrates to the audience a high-level competence for karaoke performance.

Third, the singer's linguistic versatility as reflected in karaoke performance seems to be taken seriously by the audience in Taiwan. Both the official dialect, Mandarin, and other two dialects, Southern Fukienese and Hakka, have been used extensively in karaoke performance. According to Tsai and Chiu (1993), "Taiwan's current population of twenty million mainly consists of four ethnic groups: Aborigines, Hokkien [Southern Fukienese], Hakka, and Mainlanders" (p. 189). In Taiwan both Hokkien and Hakka whose ancestors migrated from the Chinese mainland before 1940s are referred to as "Taiwanese." The term "Mainlander" denotes "post-Second World War Chinese immigrants and their Taiwan-born offspring" (p. 189). Among the four ethnic groups, over 80% of the total population is Hokkien, while Mainlanders constitute less than 14% (p. 189). Although almost everyone in Taiwan can speak Mandarin, there is a tendency to replace Mandarin with Southern Fukienese in many unofficial occasions. In addition, English and Japanese are also heard quite frequently in karaoke performance. The singer can effectively sway the

audience by simply shifting between dialects and/or languages in his or her singing. However, there is a difference between singing in Chinese dialects and "foreign languages." While English and Japanese are used for showing off one's linguistic versatility only, singing in Southern Fukienese can also send a goodwill message to those who speak the dialect regularly.

Concluding Remarks

In each of the three cases presented in this study, the singer has achieved a high terminal ethos through adding high derived ethos to high initial ethos. The initial ethos was largely predetermined, so there was very little that the singer could do about it during a karaoke session. The "device" that the singer implemented to create special effects among the audience, on the other hand, resulted in derived ethos. Both the song and the dialect chosen for singing have contributed to Wus' high terminal ethos. Liu, on the other hand, tried to put himself in a favorable position by choosing the most difficult method of singing, "singing without recorded accompaniment." Chang, nevertheless, depended heavily on linguistic versatility in enhancing his derived ethos.

What constitutes derived ethos in Taiwan might not apply to some other societies since meaning created through a specific device can vary largely with culture. For example, "singing without recorded accompaniment" might not be perceived favorably in some societies due to its lack of

certain musical effects. Singing in a variety of tongues might not be valued either. Instead of being perceived as being "versatile," the singer could be labeled as a deviate who is trying to alienate himself or herself from the mainstream culture. By the same token, the weight the initial ethos carried toward the terminal ethos might not have been so heavy had the three karaoke sessions occurred in a different society.

As karaoke becomes a way of life in East Asia, the communication functions it can perform should not be overlooked. As Barnlund (1989) stated,

> Words are only one of many ways of knowing and becoming known. The actions of other persons--the way they drive a car, care for possessions, play an instrument, relate to children--may reveal as much or more than does their speech. (p. 121)

In a society where the after-dinner speech is substituted by after-dinner karaoke, the ethos of the karaoke singer can be an issue as important as, if not more important than, the ethos of the public speaker when communication processes within it are analyzed.

Endnotes

[1]The Wade-Giles system of romanization is used to transliterate Chinese names and special Chinese terms in this paper.

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